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Case Conceptualization

# Revisiting the Utilization of Mother Tongue in L2 Classroom: Implications for EAP Classroom

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**Abstract**: The utilization of the first language (L1) in English as a second language classrooms has sparked considerable debate. Differing viewpoints rooted in various theories of second language acquisition (SLA) have emerged, either supporting or opposing the use of the native tongue in teaching an additional language. This document consolidates the ongoing discussions surrounding the incorporation of L1 in the context of teaching and learning a second language (L2). Examination of existing literature on the use of L1 in L2 instruction reveals that, theoretically, employing the first language aligns with SLA theories such as the Interdependency Principle and Meaningful Learning Theory. Furthermore, practical application indicates that purposeful use of learners' native language consistently correlates with improved acquisition of L2 linguistic forms and skills. Additionally, it is apparent that both instructors and students with lower proficiency levels view the inclusion of L1 in L2 education positively. Building upon these significant findings, a suggestion is made for implementing L1 in an EAP classroom, demonstrating how it can serve various functions, such as providing learning resources and addressing psychological and emotional aspects, in the context of L2 teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** L1 use; English for Academic Purposes; EAP classroom

## 1. Introduction

Despite the prevalent use of a monolingual teaching method that emphasizes maximizing exposure to the target language (TL) within second language (L2) classrooms, numerous empirical studies examining interactions in these settings have consistently shown that the first language (L1) has been occasionally employed in formal L2 education (Adinolfi & Astruc, 2017; DiCamilla & Antón, 2012; Izquierdo et al., 2016; Khresheh, 2012; Rabbidge, 2014). Furthermore, despite advocating for the exclusive use of TL during L2 instruction, a significant body of research demonstrates that code-switching occurs in L2 classroom discourse for various purposes, such as eliciting linguistic elements, checking comprehension, explaining language features, and managing classroom dynamics (Alrabah et al., 2016; Edstrom, 2006; Hidayati, 2012; Nukuto, 2017; Zakaria, 2013).

Additionally, contrary to the notion that the first language might negatively interfere with the development of L2 acquisition, the inclusive use of L1 has been found to offer support structures (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; DiCamilla & Antón, 2012), facilitate negotiation of meaning (Park & Manning, 2012), enhance L2 comprehension (Ringbom, 1992; Seng & Hashim, 2006; Tavares, 2015; Tsai et al., 2010), boost the uptake of L2 vocabulary (Jacobs et al., 1994; Joyce, 2018; J. Liu, 2008; Wolter, 2006), and even develop learning strategies (Nambiar, 2009; Walters, 2004).

Surprisingly, despite the evolving perspectives of scholars in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) favoring the use of the first language (L1) in L2 classrooms (Shin et al., 2020), there exists staunch support for exclusive L2 instruction in EFL countries like Vietnam. In these regions, any utilization of L1 within English classrooms is deemed as unacceptable in various institutions, leading to a sense of "guilt" or disapproval among English educators who deviate from the prescribed L2-only approach (Ngan, 2019; Nguyen & Duy, 2019). Given these circumstances, this paper undertakes a review of relevant theories and empirical studies concerning L1 use in classrooms where English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL) or as

a Second Language (ESL). The aim is to substantiate the appropriateness of employing L1 in a specific educational setting of an English for Academic Purposes classroom. To achieve this goal, this review will concentrate on (1) the foundational principles supporting the integration of L1 in L2 instructional settings, (2) the beneficial impacts of L1 use on both teaching and learning of L2, (3) the perspectives held by teachers and learners regarding the utilization of L1, and (4) practical applications within pedagogy.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 L1 Utilization through the Lens of SLA's Theories

The primary argument against incorporating L1 within L2 classrooms stems from Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1992). This hypothesis posits that resorting to L1 significantly reduces exposure to L2, thereby disrupting the acquisition of the target language (P. Lee, 2013; Macdonald, 1993). However, this reasoning presents challenges. Firstly, the notion that instructed environments solely provide L2 input is outdated, given that technological advancements in the Internet era allow learners easy access to L2 (Sawin, 2018). Secondly, Input Hypothesis' discouragement of learners' native tongue encourages simplified input, impeding the acquisition of complex L2 features (D. Liu, 2015).

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) emphasizes the negative transfer of L1 as another argument against using the first language. According to CAH, the resemblance and differences between L1 and L2 determine the success of L2 acquisition. While common linguistic features between L1 and L2 aid easy acquisition in L2, errors in L2 performance are attributed to differences between the two languages. Opponents of L1 use in formal classroom settings argue that it could lead to the persistence of errors, hindering meaningful L2 development. However, research suggests that CAH doesn't offer a complete explanation for learners' errors in L2 and fails to encompass the natural processes of negative and positive transfer as learners engage with L2 (Hummel, 2013; Ellis & Shintani, 2013).

In contrast, various SLA theories advocate for the significant role of L1 in L2 classrooms. The Interdependency Principle proposed by Cummins (1989) contends that due to the linguistic interdependence between L1 and L2, separating the proficiency of L1 from L2 impedes successful L2 acquisition. Similarly, the Meaningful Learning Theory (Brown, 2000) argues that explicit recognition of metalinguistic differences and similarities through L1 use solidifies new knowledge and facilitates comprehension of L2 complexity (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Furthermore, the Sociocultural Theory of Development supports the incorporation of L1, as it is instrumental in constructing the cognitive space for inner speech and serves as a cognitive tool aiding target language production (Ohta, 2001). Both teachers and learners using L1 help bridge knowledge gaps in L2, facilitating successful communication (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Storch & Aldosari, 2010).

Moreover, the use of L1 reduces the affective filter in L2 acquisition. It is believed that employing L1 in classroom settings decreases confusion, boosts confidence, reduces anxiety, and enhances L2 learning (Hall & Cook, 2012). Studies by Shimizu (2006), Seng and Hashim (2006), Stewart (2010), and Thongwichit (2013) revealed that low-level learners viewed L1 use positively, as it alleviated anxiety, reinforced their positive attitude toward L2 learning, and bolstered confidence in L2 communication.

### 2.2 Effects of L1 Use in L2 Classroom on L2 Acquisition

Since Hall and Cook (2012) highlighted the varied applications of L1 (e.g., translation, code-switching, L1 glossing) in the L2 classroom and identified a gap in empirical evidence regarding the impact of L1 inclusion on L2 acquisition, numerous studies have emerged to fill this void. While a comprehensive understanding of the intricate relationship between L1 inclusion in L2 instructional settings and learners' L2 acquisition remains incomplete, accumulating evidence suggests that strategic use of L1 effectively enhances learners' acquisition (Ghobadi & Ghasemi, 2015).

### 2.2.1 Translation and L2 Acquisition and Learning

Studies on translation in L2 teaching have indicated its positive impact on L2 grammar and vocabulary learning. Horst et al. (2010) found that activities incorporating translation and comparison between L1 and L2 improved low-level learners' knowledge of L2 grammar. Similarly, Şimşek (2010) concluded that L1 use in grammar explanation was more effective than monolingual instruction. Korošec (2013) observed that explicit L1-based explanations

alongside translation activities enhanced learners' L2 grammatical competence. In terms of vocabulary acquisition, studies by Zhao and Macaro (2016), Joyce (2018), and Do (2017) supported the effectiveness of L1 translation in aiding learners' uptake and retention of L2 vocabulary items.

### 2.2.2 Code-switching and L2 Acquisition and Learning

Recent studies focusing on code-switching have highlighted its positive effects on L2 grammar, vocabulary acquisition, and production skills. McManus & Marsden (2017) found that code-switching in grammar instruction correlated with improved understanding and usage of grammatical points. J. Lee and Levine (2020) demonstrated that code-switching during target vocabulary instruction led to better learning outcomes for learners at intermediate levels. Similarly, Nikula and Moore (2019) showed that code-switching helped learners avoid breakdowns in communication and improved reading comprehension. Further studies by Zhu and Vanek (2017), de la Fuente and Goldenberg (2020), Llanes and Cots (2022), and Turnbull (2019) supported code-switching's role in enhancing speaking, writing, and composition skills among L2 learners.

### 2.2.3. Glossing and L2 Acquisition and Learning

L1 glossing, a technique aiding learners by providing definitions for unknown vocabulary items, has shown positive impacts on L2 vocabulary development and comprehension. Studies by Yoshii (2006), Ko (2012), Yoshii (2013), Choi (2016), Hashemian and Fadaei (2013), Azari et al. (2017), Alharbi (2018), Kongtawee and Sappapan (2018), and Ha (2016) reported the effectiveness of L1 glossing in improving L2 lexical retention, vocabulary acquisition, and overall comprehension among learners at different proficiency levels. Studies highlighted its benefits in enhancing reading and listening comprehension, especially for low-level learners, and learners generally expressed a preference for L1 gloss over L2 gloss in comprehension tasks.

### 2.3 L1 Use from Teachers and Students' Perspectives

Apart from examining theoretical standpoints and positive empirical evidence regarding the incorporation of the native language in L2 classrooms, it's crucial to understand how teachers and students perceive the role of L1 in L2 teaching and learning. While the ELT community debates whether the native tongue should be used in L2 classrooms, an increasing number of studies validate the appreciation both teachers and learners have for integrating L1 in L2 instruction. Consistent findings emphasize that judicious use of L1 in diverse teaching and learning contexts facilitates L2 learning and acquisition.

### 2.3.1 Teacher's Perspective

Teachers are increasingly vocal about supporting the strategic use of L1 in L2 classrooms. Ferrer's (2002) study in Spain highlighted teachers' high regard for using L1 to bolster implicit L2 knowledge. Macaro (2005) also found that despite the influence of a target language-centered approach, teachers consistently deemed L1 use as necessary. Edstrom's (2006) self-analysis revealed that teachers employed L1 to establish relationships, develop cultural competence, and avoid communication breakdowns. Additionally, Yavuz (2012) emphasized teachers' views on the importance of principled L1 use for explaining linguistic features and alleviating learners' psychological barriers. Studies by Mohebbi and Alavi (2014) and others aligned with earlier research, indicating that teachers recognize the necessity of L1 for various purposes like focus-on-form instruction, scaffolding, task delineation, teacher-student connection, and classroom management. Kelly and Bruen (2015) reported that participants in their study rejected the idea that L1 inclusion creates conflicts, viewing it instead as an essential resource for L2 acquisition. McMillan and Rivers (2011) surveyed English native teachers in Japan, finding widespread support for selective L1 incorporation amidst an English-monolingual teaching policy.

### 2.3.2. Learner's Perspective

Though learners harbor mixed feelings about L1's role in L2 learning, novice learners increasingly appreciate the judicious use of their native tongue. Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008) discovered that French beginners acknowledged L1's benefits in L2 knowledge formation and reduced communication apprehension but found excessive L1 use demotivating. Brooks-Lewis (2009) found that low-proficiency adult learners positively perceived L1 use, viewing it as supportive in developing thinking, social skills, interpersonal skills, and enhancing independent study skills. Carson and Kashihara (2012) revealed in their survey that advanced students preferred less L1 use in L2 instruction, while elementary-level students favored it for

transferring knowledge, managing the classroom, and building rapport. Similar perceptions were noted in investigations in Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Vietnam by Krulatz et al. (2016), N. T. Nguyen et al. (2016), and Shuchi and Islam (2016). Neokleous (2017) expanded this research, finding that low-proficiency learners expressed strong support for teachers' L1 use and confirmed their own use of L1 among peers for clarification, confusion resolution, task navigation, recommendation, encouragement, and humor.

## 3. Pedagogical Applications of L1 in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Context

\As seen in the wealth of literature concerning the integration of L1 in L2 classrooms, it is proposed that the thoughtful and strategic use of L1 within a target language environment supports the teaching and learning of the target language, consequently aiding the development of learners' acquisition of the second language. With that in mind, this section will delve into the specific considerations and methods for thoughtfully integrating L1 in a particular EAP teaching and learning context.

### 3.1 Description of the Instructional Context

The particular setting revolves around an English course for university students at a private English center in HCMC, emphasizing an exclusive use of the L2. Despite the diverse proficiency levels of the 25 students enrolled in the 10-week course, an evident problem surfaced due to what seemed to be commercial reasons. A preliminary assessment revealed several issues: (1) Nearly half of the learners expressed difficulty in grasping academic English, leading to decreased interest, motivation, and willingness to engage in EAP learning. (2) A small portion considered learning EAP irrelevant. (3) Some felt uncomfortable with the mandatory continuous use of English. (4) A few had to retake the course due to poor performance in the end-of-course tests, particularly IELTS-based tests. Given these challenges in the current context, how can the integration of L1 into L2 instruction and classroom interaction address the obstacles hindering the progress of L2 development? Following Hall and Cook's (2012) recommendations, L1 is suggested to be employed here to fulfill three key purposes: as a resource for language learning, for effective classroom management, and to address psychological and affective concerns among learners.

### 3.2 The Extent to which L1 can be Used

Given the low English proficiency level of the class, employing Vietnamese becomes necessary. However, determining the appropriate limit for using L1 to ensure it aids learning is crucial. Cook (2005) strongly criticized the excessive use of L1 (amounting to 50%-90% of classroom discourse) by teachers, dismissing it as detrimental. He explained that an unrestricted reliance on the native tongue leads learners to become complacent, subsequently diminishing their motivation to engage in L2 learning. On the contrary, the complete avoidance of L1 is seen as impractical and unproductive in an EFL context, as the overwhelming immersion in L2 can impede L2 acquisition (Sampson 2012). Given these contrasting perspectives, the approach in the aforementioned context aligns with the suggestion made by Ellis and Shintani (2013), advocating that the proportion of L1 use in an L2 classroom should not surpass 15 percent.

### 3.3 Leveraging L1 as an Educational Resource

Native language (L1) knowledge serves as a readily available resource for shaping learners' mastery of the target language (L2) – encompassing pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and even intercultural communication skills. Within the realm of L2 pronunciation instruction, Carey et al. (2015) champion the utilization of learners' L1 phonological understanding as scaffolding for progressive internalization of L2 pronunciation. This approach proves particularly advantageous for beginners grappling with limited L2 exposure. Directly mimicking native-like pronunciation can be an arduous and often demotivating endeavor. Here, tapping into familiar L1 sounds as points of reference provides a bridge for learners to grasp the nuances of L2 phonetic features. Consider the acquisition of English consonants /θ/ and /ð/, which pose unique challenges due to their distinctiveness within the language. Investing instructional time in detailed explanations of their formation or repetitive "listen and repeat" drills can feel cumbersome, monotonous, and ultimately ineffective. While Vietnamese lacks direct equivalents for these sounds, its inventory boasts similar phonemes. By capitalizing on this L1 knowledge, learners can bridge the gap, making the acquisition and production of English /θ/ and /ð/ a less daunting task. In essence, harnessing L1 knowledge acts as a

potent catalyst for constructing L2 competency, fostering a more efficient and engaging learning journey.

Regarding vocabulary instruction, utilizing L1 serves as a valuable resource for educators and learners, contributing significantly to enhancing L2 acquisition. There are various ways to leverage L1 in this specific context for the benefit of the targeted learners. To begin with, occasional direct translation can be employed to elucidate abstract academic lexis, which proves advantageous particularly for lower-level English learners. The exclusive use of the target language can somewhat disrupt learners' ability to connect form and meaning, making sporadic introduction of L1 equivalents beneficial for L2 vocabulary learning (Seng & Hashim, 2006). However, it's imperative to confine L1 direct translation to the explanation of abstract vocabulary; otherwise, learners might develop the misconception that L1 can substitute L2 whenever they face communication hurdles in the latter language (Ghobadi & Ghasemi, 2015, p. 251). Secondly, incorporating code-switching in EAP classroom interactions can effectively highlight learners' gaps in L2 knowledge, thereby fostering their comprehension of the target language (Celik, 2003). Allowing learners the opportunity to code-switch enables them to engage actively in negotiating meaning and structuring L2 conceptualization (Moore, 2002). Lastly, providing glosses in Vietnamese for specific lexical items in academic reading and listening texts serves as an effective tool not only in assisting low-proficiency learners in comprehending texts but also in enhancing their incidental vocabulary acquisition due to the prominence of words highlighted by glosses (Warren et al., 2018). Consequently, the use of L1 glossing in this context is favorable as it may significantly enrich the lexical resources of the learners.

When it comes to learning L2 grammar, learners with low proficiency levels lack prior knowledge of the L2 grammatical system. Hence, it's essential to leverage the learners' competence in L1 grammar as a starting point to introduce L2 grammatical concepts. In this specific context, the inclusion of L1 can take shape in two ways: through L1-L2 contrastive analysis activities and translation exercises. Engaging in cross-linguistic contrastive analysis allows learners to recognize similarities and differences between L1 and L2 features, aiding in the construction of explicit knowledge of L2 grammar that can be further reinforced through interactive communicative tasks (Arshad et al., 2015). Additionally, employing translation exercises towards the conclusion of grammatical explanation sessions serves a dual purpose: (1) checking immediate comprehension and (2) reinforcing the systemization and rationalization of L2 grammatical knowledge (Carreres & Noriega-Sánchez, 2011). In essence, the integration of translation activities serves as an effective tool for both educators and learners to evaluate the extent of comprehension of L2 grammatical features and to explicitly identify any negative transfer of L1 to L2 knowledge.

To effectively communicate in a second language (L2), beyond linguistic skills, intercultural communicative competence is crucial. Integrating L1 into instruction can aid in developing this proficiency. Comparing an individual's Language-Culture 1 (LC1) and Language-Culture 2 (LC2) can enhance intercultural awareness (Fantini, 2012). Given learners' low English proficiency, using L1 can be beneficial through bilingual explanations, cross-cultural activities, feedback after tasks, and discussions on cultural aspects in English-speaking countries.

### 3.4 Employment of L1 as Classroom Management Technique

Using the target language (TL) for classroom management undoubtedly enhances exposure to the second language, yet strict adherence to TL-only for complex tasks can lead to misunderstandings and hindered progress (Auerbach, 1993). Advocates suggest judiciously incorporating the native language (L1) to handle intricate activities, maintaining smooth learning while preserving the importance of TL exposure (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). In this learning context, the teacher can give instructions in appropriate-level TL for activities and then verify understanding by asking students to restate requirements in their L1. Furthermore, learners encountering difficulties are encouraged to use code-switching to communicate problems to peers or the teacher.

Language education involves not just teaching language skills but also developing learners' mentality and behavior. L1 serves as a valuable tool for maintaining classroom discipline and addressing learner misconduct (Macaro, 2005). While prioritizing the use of the second language for classroom discipline is crucial, in certain situations, the complete absence of L1 can exacerbate confusion. Thus, strategically utilizing L1 can explicitly address problematic behavior and provide clarity on proper rectification methods.

### 3.5 L1 Inclusion to Moderate Psychological-Affective Matters

Concerning the psychological aspect, optimal learning occurs in a non-threatening environment. Exclusively using L2, particularly in virtual classrooms, might induce feelings of intimidation and isolation among learners with lower proficiency levels (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003). Thus, in the current teaching context where some learners feel demotivated due to past English learning experiences, employing principled L1 in instructions and classroom management, as discussed earlier, aims to foster a sense of security, ultimately reducing negative perceptions toward L2 learning.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that integrating L1 in the L2 classroom diminishes anxiety, which negatively impacts L2 acquisition and performance. Extending L1 use in the current online setting to activities like brainstorming, exchanging opinions with peers and teachers, seeking clarification, and providing peer feedback can enhance the relevance, constructive engagement, and comfort of L2 learning. This approach allows learners to actively contribute to collective learning while aiding and supporting each other in a relaxed environment.

Additionally, sporadic use of L1 for sharing jokes, experiences, or providing guidance helps establish rapport with learners, crucial in the success of an online class. Strengthening the teacher-learner relationship despite geographical distances allows learners to feel more comfortable confiding in their teacher. Consequently, the teacher can offer emotional support, helping students overcome psychological barriers that negatively impact their L2 learning experience.

## 4. Conclusions

Influenced by the monolingual teaching approach favored by the predominant native English language teaching model, the use of L1 has been criticized for hindering L2 acquisition, perpetuating a myth that lacks substantial evidence (Ellis & Shintani, 2013). Contrarily, recent SLA theories and empirical studies challenge this notion. The theoretical perspective aligns L1 use with the Interdependency Principle, Meaningful Learning Theory, Sociocultural Theory of Development, and Affective Filter Hypothesis. Empirical evidence consistently suggests that strategically incorporating learners' mother tongue enhances L2 learning across various language aspects (grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Additionally, teachers and low-proficiency learners strongly support including L1 in L2 classroom discourse, recognizing its strategic utility for multiple purposes such as instruction, classroom management, and emotional support.

Consequently, the negative perception surrounding L1 use in L2 classrooms should be dispelled. The focus should shift from questioning whether L1 should be included to how it can be effectively utilized, particularly in virtual L2 classrooms. However, recognizing the diversity among teaching and learning contexts, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. L2 educators should consider various factors (language education policy, curriculum objectives, learner opinions, achievements, and teaching constraints) to make informed decisions about integrating L1 in the L2 classroom.

In this paper's context, a proposal aimed to strategically leverage the students' L1 (Vietnamese) to enhance L2 learning in an online course at a private English center in Ho Chi Minh City where the writer is currently employed. The suggestions catered to the specific features of this context, and their broader applicability to other L2 teaching settings requires further empirical investigation.

In conclusion, the learners' first language plays a pivotal role in L2 teaching and learning. Its significance cannot be disregarded. Teachers should be mindful of their contexts, engage in continuous reflection on their teaching practices, and stay abreast of current research to effectively utilize L1 for the benefit of their learners.

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